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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 PRETORIA 002374

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SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAGR](#) [ETRD](#) [SENV](#) [TBIO](#) [SF](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICA, BIOSAFETY UPDATE AND STATE SENIOR
BIOTECH ADVISOR VISIT

REFS: A) PRETORIA 1256; B) 04 PRETORIA 5345

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED, PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

1. (SBU) Summary. During a June 8-15 visit to South Africa, State Department Special Advisor for Biotechnology Madelyn Spirnak met with government officials, researchers, private sector representatives and officials from the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) to discuss agricultural biotechnology and biosafety issues. Ms. Spirnak also participated in a workshop on Biotechnology and Food Aid, where participants from African governments highlighted needs for assistance in capacity building. South African government officials voiced an interest in becoming more assertive within Africa on biosafety issues; Agriculture Department officials noted capacity challenges in implementing GMO regulations; and researchers at the parastatal Agricultural Research Council reported on developments in commercializing local GMO research. NEPAD representatives described a new biotech advisory panel and other biotech initiatives. Private sector representatives noted how the proportion of transgenic crops in South Africa is steadily increasing. End summary.

Science & Technology, Environment and Health Departments

2. (SBU) During a June 8 discussion with visiting State Department Senior Advisor for Agricultural Biotechnology Madelyn Spirnak, South African government (SAG) policymakers from several government departments provided feedback on recent COP/MOP meetings of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety held in Montreal. They noted that South Africa's position was out of sync with much of the rest of the "Africa group" and that in meetings of the Africa group, South Africa was the only country to provide any push-back to the dominating influence of the Chairperson, Ethiopia's Dr. Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher. They noted that while African country representatives espoused different viewpoints in bilateral conversations, none but the South Africans would take Dr. Tewolde on in group settings. And when a few African delegates strayed from Tewolde's script for Africa in individual statements made during the meetings, he disciplined them.

3. (SBU) Department of Science & Technology's Director for Biotechnology, Ben Durham, offered his personal view that South Africa needs to be even more assertive, given the country's position on and support for biotechnology. Newly-appointed Director for Biosafety of the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT), Wadzi Mandivenyi, reported that the South African delegation leader, DEAT Deputy Director General Fundisile Mketeni, told her that he wants the South African government to strategize better and identify ways to counter the influence of Dr. Tewolde. (Note: Mandivenyi a Zimbabwe-born scientist who worked with biotechnology stakeholder organization AfricaBio prior to assuming the new position at DEAT, is a welcome choice; as Ref A noted, some government sources were concerned that DEAT would select a Biosafety Director with anti-GMO leanings. End note.)

4. (SBU) According to the SAG officials, during the COP-MOP, South Africa offered to support and host a regional technical working group on liability and redress issues. South Africa also hopes to engage more proactively with individual countries in the region and in regional contexts such as NEPAD's southern region working group, to discuss biotechnology and biosafety issues in a more constructive and practical way, and thereby gain some allies for the SAG perspective.

Workshop on Biotechnology and Food Aid

5. (U) Spirnak attended the final sessions of the

USAID/State Department sponsored workshop for African Policymakers on Biotechnology and Food Aid on June 10. During the closing discussion among participants, the facilitator requested that each country select a spokesperson who could provide input for the workshop report on biotechnology areas in which his/her country had particular needs. Almost without exception, participants called for assistance in developing a policy framework, capacity building for developing the framework as well as in biotech research, and public outreach/awareness. Spirnak gave brief closing remarks in which she summarized the apparent consensus on needs of African countries but stressed the importance of having in place a system which would allow food aid to be received from the United States should it be needed and desired.

Visit to Agricultural Research Council

16. (U) On June 13, Spirnak visited Dr. Kobie de Ronde and her staff at the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) and was briefed on the status of their USAID-funded transgenic potato project in cooperation with Michigan State University. The project is in the third year of contained field trials with a projected commercialization time-frame of 2007. The potato contains a Syngenta-developed gene in a South African cultivar engineered to resist the tuber moth, which is particularly important for subsistence farmers storing their potatoes after harvest. Dr. de Ronde explained that before petitioning for commercialization, a "socio-economic impact" questionnaire would be completed in order to gain the views of farmers and their communities about the use of the genetically-engineered potato. The contained trials are taking place in six regions, representing different ecological areas of South Africa. Five of the six planting trials are completed. Storage trials so far show 100 percent control of the moth and no damage to non-transgenic lines.

17. (U) ARC is also working on a drought-resistant soybean, which is locally-produced with a gene licensed from Belgium. The earliest that the soybean could be commercialized would be 2008. The group is also working on: a virus-resistant ornamental plant, which has shown some success; a virus resistant sweet potato that has not been successful due to weevil problems; and virus resistant tomatoes. ARC is a UNESCO biotechnology training center for Africa. It also is working on gene mining projects on cow peas, sorghum and potatoes to develop locally genes that will help resource-poor farmers.

18. (SBU) During Spirnak's June 8 meeting with Department of Science & Technology's Ben Durham, he advised that he (and presumably his Department) would be pushing for insertion of terminator genes in South Africa-engineered traits. He asserted that South Africa's economy should benefit economically from the fruits of its research. Spirnak asked Dr. de Ronde (without reference to Durham) if there was any thought of insertion of terminator genes into ARC's transgenic plants. She said that the idea had come up in recent interagency meetings but she did not think that it would come to anything.

Agriculture Department's GMO Officials

19. (SBU) Spirnak and AgCouns Reynolds visited Julian Jaftha, Senior Manager, Genetic Resources, and Michelle Vosges, GMO Registrar on June 13 and had a good discussion. They had not been in Montreal but were following the COP-MOP II issues. Julian said the South African delegation's final report has not been completed, but he understands that the technical working group on liability and redress did not make much progress and that "may contain" will be with us for some time to come. Michelle confirmed that she has only 3 staff to support her work which includes administering the GMO Act, the Plant Breeders Right Act, and setting up and maintaining a joint website, a clearing house for information. On the positive side, her superiors have approved 5 additional positions and have funded two of those positions which she plans to advertise soon. (Note: we informed both Pioneer and Monsanto the following day about the two new positions and they immediately saw the benefits from encouraging qualified applicants to apply. End Note)

110. (SBU) Jaftha noted that the Amended GMO Act, to comply with the Cartagena Protocol, has been approved by the Cabinet and is now with the State Law Advisors prior to making its way to Parliament for final passage. He said his biggest challenges are interdepartmental coordination and the need for increased capacity of decision makers, particularly on the advisory committee which is appointed by the Minister of Agriculture. He noted that there is little that the USG can do about these problems in a direct way, because there is now a high level of engagement from anti-GMO lobbyists and any hint of U.S. involvement fuels the

outcry against the initiative.

11. (SBU) In response to a question about the status of applications for deregulation of stacked events, Jaftha said the Executive Council would be discussing this matter next week. He asked what additional information is required by U.S. regulators when reviewing an application for stacked events when each of the events has already been approved separately. Spirnak and Reynolds have received a brief summary of what is required from Washington agencies and have already forwarded this to the GMO Registrar's office. Comment: We believe that the GMO Registrar's office does not have a problem with the stacked event applications but that they need further information to share with the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) which has reportedly held back its concurrence seeking further information. End comment.

NEPAD S&T Advisor and Biosciences Coordinator

12. (SBU) Spirnak and AgCouns met with Dr. John Mugabe, NEPAD's Science & Technology advisor, and Prof. Aggrey Ambali, his biotech coordinator, during which Mugabe discussed NEPAD's three major biotech initiatives. First, Mugabe reported that he was about to issue a press release announcing the fifteen members of a NEPAD-African Union biotech advisory panel. In response to Spirnak's request for the identities of the panel, he mentioned in particular, Egypt's Ismael Serag Eldin, Ethiopia's Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher, Calestous Juma of Harvard, along with representatives from other African countries. Mugabe noted that panel members were chosen to represent a diverse scientific community, some of whom had no biotech experience. Their focus would be managing transboundary risks of LMO's, while maximizing benefits. Questioned about the inclusion of Tewolde and the possibility of his overpowering those with no biotech experience, Mugabe said that he doubted that Tewolde would be able to assert his will because of the high caliber of others on the panel. Mugabe said the panel would be assisted by an expert group which would provide reports to them on key issues. The panel is expected to have an eighteen-month life. It will begin with a meeting in August 2005 in South Africa and is to report its findings at the July 2006 AU Summit in Addis Ababa. In advance of that Summit, African agriculture, trade, and environment ministers would be invited to an inter-ministerial meeting in May to hear preliminary findings of the panel. He expected that panel meetings in advance of the Summit would take place primarily in South Africa. Asked if the panel would endorse the AU Model Biosafety law, Mugabe responded that there would be no model law for Africa. It was up to each country to make its own legislative decisions, but the advisory panel would try to provide un-biased, scientific information to help countries' policy-making.

13. (SBU) The second NEPAD biotech initiative involves networking of four African biosciences Hubs, taking advantage of existing regional biotech leaders: Senegal, Egypt, South Africa and Kenya. Steering committees for these hubs also would focus on biosafety/transboundary issues. The third initiative involves building public awareness and it will be launched with the assistance of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), which already has conducted seminars in South Africa and Zimbabwe.

14. (SBU) Spirnak informed Mugabe that she was headed to the West African Biotechnology Ministerial in Bamako and asked if he or his representative would attend. Mugabe responded that he had made a "conscious decision" not to attend based on last year's Ministerial in Burkina Faso. He explained that he felt that it was improper for Ministers to be asked to approve papers that had been written by USAID contractors. He noted that several ministers were quite exercised about this, including the Nigerians "who are still talking about it."

Meetings with private sector biotech/seed companies

15. (SBU) Spirnak and Ag Counselor met on June 14 with leading American seed and grain trading companies present in the Johannesburg area. Monsanto explained that more than 90 percent of the cotton harvested in South Africa is transgenic, about 50 percent of the soybeans are transgenic, and about 20 percent of the corn is transgenic. Although new approvals are slow in coming, biotech seed sales in South Africa have been good, and these percentages are expected to continue to rise over time. Monsanto reported that they applied for a stacked event in late 2001 (Bollgard with round-up ready cotton) and that they believe all of the members of the GMO Executive Council except DEAT have approved it for commercial use. Monsanto also applied for a stacked event in corn (810 with NK603) about six months ago, and no decision has been made by the GMO Executive Council.

¶16. (SBU) Cargill's Managing Director for South Africa explained that their primary goal is to meet the demands of all customers with the appropriate products. They are busy sourcing many non-GMO truckloads of corn for Zimbabwe. This is not difficult because many cooperatives in northern South Africa are oriented to exports to Zimbabwe and only carry non-GMO maize in their silos. However, he noted that it has become very difficult to guarantee non-GMO corn from South Africa in the case of large ocean vessels. The risk of rejection at discharge is getting higher each year. In his opinion, once the transgenic content in South African corn reaches thirty to forty percent, perhaps as early as next season, then the quote Game is Over unquote. There will no longer be a capability to segregate and certify that large shipments of South African corn have no transgenic content.

¶17. (U) Spirnak also met with journalists from South African Broadcasting Corporation, Farmers' Weekly and vernacular Landbou (Post will forward any articles resulting from the meeting) and with a leading food safety and nutrition researcher, Dr. Lisa Korsten at the University of Pretoria.

¶18. Ms. Spirnak has approved this cable.

FRAZER